

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE  
63<sup>RD</sup> WORKING GROUP MEETING

**Weekly Meeting  
Summary Notes**

28 September 2005  
Geneva, Palais des Nations, Room A206

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## **I Afghanistan and surrounding region – displacement and return**

*By Mr. Salvatore Lombardo, UNHCR and Mr. Amr Taha, IOM*

**Mr. Lombardo**, Head of UNHCR's Afghanistan Comprehensive Solutions Unit, briefed on the Afghan refugee and displacement situation. Roughly sketching the development over time, he explained that in 2002 6 to 8 million Afghans resided abroad, the majority of them in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. By September 2005, about 4 million had returned. Some 570,000 came back during the course of this year. Yet, about 3.3 million Afghans still remain outside their country.

A number of factors complicate their full repatriation. First of all, it is well known that the security situation in Afghanistan is still critical. Thus, refugees who want to go back prefer to return to relatively secure areas only, such as Kabul.

Secondly, Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran can roughly be divided into two groups with different prospects for reintegration. 1) Those who left Afghanistan 5 to 6 years ago, most of whom maintained strong links to their home country and have by now returned. 2) Those who fled the country 25 to 30 years ago and whose connections to Afghanistan have become very weak. Mr. Lombardo explained that over 60 percent of the 800,000 to 900,000 Afghan refugees residing in Iran belong to this second group. Their integration in the host countries may become inevitable. Furthermore, he stressed that it is important to understand that around 50 percent of all Afghan refugees are less than 18 years old. Many are born abroad. The issue of 2<sup>nd</sup> generation refugees is therefore one of the major factors complicating voluntary repatriation.

Thirdly, the political and economic situation creates additional obstacles. Afghanistan's relations with its neighbours are very delicate, especially in the case of Pakistan. Relations with Iran have traditionally been good, but have recently deteriorated due to the fact that Afghanistan has sided more openly with the United States. However, regional cooperation is critical for any solution to the refugee problem. Furthermore, the Afghanistan's economic situation is extremely fragile. Large parts of the country are

underdeveloped. About 50 percent of the GDP is coming from the drug business. The government budget is almost fully financed by donors. While cross-border trade has improved, the overall poor economic conditions are not encouraging repatriation. In sum, Mr. Lombardo suggested, that agencies are no longer facing a classic refugee situation. Rather, it has been transformed from a humanitarian into multifaceted problem including development, protection, migration etc.

Referring to UNHCR's assessment of Afghanistan, he stressed the following points: It is critical to understand that the job in Afghanistan will not be finished within the next 10 to 15 years. There has been some progress. For example, since 2002 no major displacement has occurred – remarkable for a country that has swung in and out of displacement crises for the last 30 years. The recent elections also attest to some improvement in terms of rule of law and governance, however the lack of adequate capacities in this area prevents many refugees from returning to their areas of origin. Overall, UNHCR expects no rapid economic, social or political progress in Afghanistan, at least in the mid-term.

Mr. Lombardo then briefly addressed some of UNHCR's initiatives in the country and the region. Firstly, UNHCR is actively engaged in a social research project, which seeks to generate more reliable data on Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and Iran. He cited the recent conclusion of an unprecedented refugee census in Pakistan as a major achievement. Secondly, UNHCR assists returnees with travel and living allowances, as well as information. Thirdly, it seeks to address the problems of those refugees going back and forth between neighbouring countries and Afghanistan. For example, the joint effort of UNHCR, IOM and ILO led to Iran's recent issuance of 200,000 work visas for Afghans. Fourthly, UNHCR is engaged in all aspects protection, which is still critical in and outside of Afghanistan.

**Mr. Amr Taha**, Emergency and Post Conflict Officer in IOM's Operations Support Department, agreed with most of the issues and problems mentioned by Mr. Lombardo and then briefly informed participants about IOM activities and programmes in Afghanistan.

Firstly, IOM assists in the return of IDPs and refugees by providing medical support, transportation, food and agricultural kits. Secondly, IOM runs 44 long-term reintegration programmes, primarily in the north and west of the country, which are preferred destinations for returnees due to their relative security. Thirdly, IOM actively supports the return of qualified Afghans. For example, it was instrumental in the return of 350 professionals to the Afghan government bureaucracy. Fourthly, addressing the problem of migration, IOM supports capacity building for border authorities including in Kabul airport as well as in the Ministry of Interior. Fifthly, IOM is very active on the issue of counter-trafficking. The recent establishment of a government commission on this issue was facilitated and welcomed by IOM. Furthermore, the organization is active in community stabilization and DDR initiatives. Mr. Taha also noted that IOM has long been present in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan and supports a regional approach to the refugee and displacement problems. For example, it has helped establishing an academy on regional migration in Iran.

During the discussion, Mr. Lombardo explained to ICRC that 32 refugee camps in Pakistan were closed on security grounds during this year. About 200 camps remain, with further consolidation being possible. Yet, he also emphasized that the Pakistani authorities have no clear long-term strategy to address the camp situation. On internal displacement – the number of IDPs has diminished by 90% to about 100,000 during the last 4 years – UNHCR will conclude its IDP programme by the end of 2006. On the question of the potential role of the IASC, Mr. Lombardo suggested a statement of commitment on the issue of Afghanistan from the IASC heads of agencies.

## **II Gender equality**

*By Ms. Kate Burns, OCHA*

Ms. Burns, who is a senior gender advisor in OCHA and one of the co-chairs of the IASC Task Force on Gender and Humanitarian Assistance, briefed on the work of the Task Force and ongoing efforts to mainstream gender into the work of humanitarian actors.

First of all, Ms. Burns pointed out, that the issue of gender should not, as is often the case, be considered only as something concerning or relating to women. It is increasingly recognized that activities need to be focused also towards men and/or young boys. Ms. Burns gave the example of the Tsunami, which had killed a lot of women and left men in an inexperienced role in charge of households and childcare.

The IASC Task Force on Gender and Humanitarian Assistance is in the process of developing a Handbook on gender mainstreaming in humanitarian crisis and welcomed interested partners to join the work. Also, Ms. Burns underlined the need to incorporate the issue of gender equality and gender mainstreaming into the work of the recently established clusters for humanitarian response. The Task Force wants to engage in the work of the Cluster Working Groups and provide measurement tools/checklists to make sure that gender is thoroughly dealt with in each of the respective cluster areas.

The IASC has endorsed the Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings, developed by the Task Force. The Guidelines will be launched in October 2005 and will be available in English, French, Spanish and Arabic.

Ms. Burns flagged the existence of a new UN initiative called Global Call to Action to Stop Rape in War. The initiative is aimed at developing a systematic, coherent framework for inter-agency action to support prevention and response related to sexual and gender-based violence in war zones.

Lastly Ms. Burns mentioned that as a new feature on OCHA's website, a Gender Equality site has been created, which, among others, contains OCHA's newly developed Policy & Action plan on Gender Equality (<http://ochaonline.un.org/gender>).

In the discussion following the briefing Ms. Burns acknowledged the work on gender mainstreaming policies done by other entities, for instance UNMAS and UNDP/DDR,

and ensured the Task Force would link up with these initiatives. On a question regarding the timeframe for developing the Handbook, Ms. Burns said that it was the hope to have pilots ready for field-testing by the end of 2005.

### III IASC Standard Briefing

*By Ms. Yukiko Yoshida, IASC Secretariat*

Before the standard briefing, Mr. Kulmiye Mohamed from IDD/OCHA announced the publication of a Forced Migration Review Supplement entitled “Protecting and assisting the internally displaced: the way forward”. The review is available online on <http://www.fmreview.org/ocha-idpsupplement.htm>

- This afternoon at 15.30 there is an HLWG meeting on the Health situation in Niger. The meetings will take place in the Council Chamber of the Palais des Nations (1<sup>st</sup> floor, door 6)
- In the coming days a number of the IASC Cluster Working Groups are meeting:
  - This afternoon from 16.00 – 17.00 the Emergency Shelter group will meet in UNHCR HQs (Emergency Operations Room, Basement)
  - On 29 September from 15.00 – 16.00 the CWG on Camp Coordination & Management is meeting in UNHCR HQs
  - On 30 September the CWG on Health is meeting from 15.00 – 16.00 in WHO HQs (Room M205 - M Building, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor)
- On 30 September there will be a meeting of Humanitarian Common Services Group. The meeting will take place in Room H-3 of the Palais des Nations, from 14.00 – 17.30.
- Following documents have been shared with the IASC: 1) The Final Summary Record of Proceedings of the IASC WG Retreat (6-7 September); 2) The Final Synthesis Report on Cluster Working Groups; and 3) The Final Summary Record and Action Points of the Ad Hoc IASC Principals Meeting (12 September), including the Final Outcome Statement.

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